

Why Liberal Learning

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History offers many explanations for why people should acquire what today we typically term a “broad, liberal-arts education.” Prominent thinkers and leaders over the centuries have expounded on the virtues of such learning. Aristotle said liberal education is necessary if one is to act “nobly.” Benjamin Franklin said it was needed in order to cultivate “the best capacities” in humans. And Einstein found in liberal learning the locus for imagination, which he deemed more important than raw knowledge.

Within most such contentions is a common idea: liberal learning is critical to young people because it prepares them for “public life”—not just politics and government, but the civic life in which we should all partake. Whether as voters, advocates, or candidates, for a democracy to function well its citizens must be actively engaged in the decisions that affect their lives and those of their children.

Yet too few Americans are so engaged. Consider so simple a gauge as voter turn-out for presidential elections, which declined steadily from 1960 (63 percent of the voting population) to 2000 (51 percent, rising back to 55 percent in 2004). In off-year congressional elections, the figures are worse: 47 percent turnout in 1962, 37 percent in 2002. Such paltry rates of participation do not bode well for our democracy.

Public life doesn't end at the ballot box, however. From activism to taxes, from schools to zoning, we engage each other in public forums on a near-daily basis. At least as often, Americans engage each other in the vital non-governmental sector we know as “civil society,” the clubs and organizations, the leagues and alliances, the teams and boards, that form bridges between otherwise isolated individuals and a 300-million person nation.

For such engagements to succeed, one need not have a college degree, much less a Ph.D. But it's close to essential to have a broad basic education. Over the years, really good primary and secondary schools have imparted this to their pupils. Their leaders and teachers have understood that young people who lack a command of English, who can't follow or create arguments in a manner that is readily understood by others, who do not grasp the behavioral requirements of civil discourse, and who are incapable of thinking about how changes in one area of government or

civil society can dramatically impact life in other realms of community life—such people are destined to find themselves on the outside looking in as others make decisions that affect their lives, their neighborhood, their city, state, and nation.

The need for more such schools—one may fairly say all schools—is a long-standing concern of ours, of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and of its antecedent Educational Excellence Network. For a quarter century, we’ve been writing, fretting, analyzing, and urging in this domain. That we haven’t entirely succeeded is no reason to stop pushing for a K-12 system that provides every young American with an education that allows them to become fully functioning and contributing members of society. Indeed, one can fairly say that it’s more important today—and its absence more ominous—than two decades ago. Hence, in December 2006 we organized a conference that brought together 200-plus scholars, policy leaders, public officials, and educators to discuss what can be done in the NCLB era to strengthen liberal learning in U.S. schools.

Even as leaders in Congress cogitate about reauthorization of that epochal but flawed statute, we wanted to know whether anybody was prepared to tackle one of NCLB’s harmful if unintended consequences? We refer, of course, to “the big curricular squeeze”—the compression of the school program to reading and math skills and, sometimes science. Is this really what Congress intended in 2001? Does anybody really think that basic skills are sufficient for a 21st Century education? If not, what can be done to rebalance the curriculum?

The conference made clear that plenty of others share these concerns and that others should be helped to understand them. So, with the generous support of the Calder Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and with expert editorial help from Martin Davis, we gathered the key findings and recommendations of the conference into the present volume.

What Was OK Yesterday Doesn’t Cut It Today

Once upon a time, most U.S. schools sought a balanced education for their students. In addition to the three R’s, along with generous exposure to history, math, science, literature, music, and art, these young people also received training in debate, in deportment, in values and character, and in elocution. One could fairly say they were being groomed for leadership or at least for responsible citizenship.

Even those not so “groomed,” however, still learned the great stories of democracy, stories such as George Washington doffing the mantle of leadership at the

height of his power, Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, Jane Addams's work with the poor, Andrew Carnegie's business success followed by philanthropy, Winston Churchill's lonely stand against Fascism, etc. And they were taught that they could, with learning and hard work, rise above their circumstances. So great are the numbers of those who transcended their origins and upbringings that the story has a name—the "American dream." Its mythos continues today, not because people want to believe in the impossible, but because few of us don't know someone who has "made it" in this fashion. The American dream retains a strong basis in reality.

Once upon a time, young people who had an inadequate education could also expect to earn an adequate living. Until recent decades, the U.S. economy contained enough low-skill, decent-paying jobs to permit ill-educated hard-workers to live a moderately comfortable life.

But it's getting harder to make such a life without a solid education. Today's children who fail to get one will not only find limited opportunities to participate in public life and civil society, but will also find it more difficult to earn a decent living. Today's economy is less forgiving of a weak education. Every year brings fewer "low-skill, high-pay" jobs. Because of globalization, this is a trend that will not likely change.

Not only will decent jobs be harder to come by, but keeping them will prove more difficult, too. Our society and economy are changing fast. Those who are unready to adapt will find themselves with fewer career options, fewer chances to participate in public life, and fewer chances to interact with the community at large.

Writing in 1984, we warned that failure to teach the liberal arts well would lead to graduates "who have no real intellectual interests or cultural lives, [whose] behavior is defined by the interaction between hedonistic cravings and externally imposed controls, who have no valid bases for judging the claims of politicians, gurus, and cult figures, and who lack any sense of a collective past or any vision of a better future."

Today, such words should be written in fire. Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* cataloged the many ways in which Americans are drawing farther into themselves and away from their communities, neighbors, even their own families. He warned that we're becoming a nation of spectators rather than doers, a society of individuals who would rather watch Monday Night Football (or Desperate Housewives) at home alone, than to spend the evening with co-workers or neighbors at the bowling alley, the American Legion, the PTA, or the church sisterhood. More people are also willing to let politicians "fix" our problems, rather than take the mantle of leadership.

Worse still, we could be forfeiting our souls. Without systematic exposure in

school to what Matthew Arnold called “the best that has been thought and said in the world,” we are increasingly likely to be captured by the inanities and sensationalism of popular culture. We’re surrounded by it, of course, and it requires nothing from the recipient other than the willingness to sit in front of a blinking screen. Offering up soft porn and hard violence, it appeals to our basest instincts. And a steady diet of it makes us more susceptible to prejudice, rumor, brainwashing, fundamentalism, and sloganeering while deadening our sensibilities.

Saving Us From Ourselves

This is bad for democracy itself. As Dewey observed,

A [Democratic] society ... must see to it that intellectual opportunities are accessible to all on equable and easy terms.... A society marked off into classes need be specially attentive only to the education of its ruling elements. A society which is mobile, which is full of channels for the distribution of a change occurring anywhere, must see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability. Otherwise, they will be overwhelmed by the changes in which they are caught and whose significance or connections they do not perceive.

That liberal learning for all students is perhaps the surest path out of this quagmire is no new thought. Throughout the 20th Century, commentators noted its role in creating and sustaining modern democracy.

Writing just prior to America’s entry into World War II when the threat to freedom and democracy was palpable and the outcome of the forthcoming struggle by no means assured, Isaac Kandel argued for grounding every student in a core curriculum based upon the liberal arts:

Education, true education, should liberate; it should cultivate the genuinely free man, the man of moral judgment, of intellectual integrity; it should give us the power to see the other side; it should impart nobility of purpose and kindness of spirit. It should leave with us the inescapable truth that man is a spiritual being and that that the struggle for the mastery of the forces of nature is not merely for the satisfaction of human needs but is also inspired by the spiritual end of reaching out beyond our immediate lives to something eternal.

And more recently, *A Nation at Risk* recognized the centrality of a strong liberal education.

A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom.

The years after 1983 brought multiple efforts to address the shortcomings of K-12 education, particularly state-level efforts to create a transparent system of accountability based upon students' achievements in relation to new academic standards. Given widespread concern about flat student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), falling SAT scores, and flagging results on international assessments such as TIMSS and PISA, the pursuit of a standards-based strategy made sense.

The 800-pound gorilla of the standards movement is, of course, the federal No Child Left Behind act. Its premise was straightforward: prod all states to set academic standards and accompany them with exams to test students on how well they've mastered the material, with annual progress expected and measured, with interventions in schools that do not make such progress, all with the goal of having 100 percent of young people "proficient" by 2014.

Yet NCLB, like most state-level efforts, brought unintended consequences. Notably, the law requires that academic gains be demonstrated only in reading and math, and its sanctions and interventions are triggered only by failure to make gains in those two areas. They're worthy skills, yes, but not the whole of a proper education. Yet states, local school systems, and educators, understandably loath to be found wanting, have significantly ramped up the time spent teaching these two subjects and preparing students to take tests in them, to the detriment of "broad" and "liberal" and "arts."

Detriment takes many forms. It may be as obvious as diminished time for music and civics, or reduced course offerings in foreign languages, literature, and history. It may also be more subtle as teachers and counselors encourage fewer students to take liberal arts electives and administrators budget less money for liberal arts course materials.

Pressure to pass basic skills tests also leads teachers—often against their better judgment—to substitute "drill and kill" for "problem solving" or to forfeit real literature in favor of artificially sequenced textbooks filled with vapid, insignificant stories. "Rich content" doesn't have many forms of self-defense, not in the face of

external demands to hoist more kids over a specific bar to be determined by their scores on standardized tests. Never mind that E. D. Hirsch and others have repeatedly shown the danger that lurks here: that while reading “skills” may appear to rise in the early grades from adherence to structured reading “programs,” student results will fall off—as in fact they’ve done—in the middle grades unless a solid content foundation has been laid. That’s because success in advanced reading requires knowledge and understanding, not just decoding skills. Schools that neglect the knowledge base in the early grades can anticipate that their students will not be able to comprehend much in the middle grades and high school even if they appear able to “read” the words on a page.

We should have seen this coming. We and others who have pressed for higher academic standards in recent years—particularly since the Charlottesville education “summit” set national education goals in 1989—should have anticipated the “zero sum” problem that it would give rise to: more emphasis on some things would inevitably mean less attention to others. Insofar as we recognized this, however, we naively assumed that school days and years would expand to accommodate more of everything; that teachers would somehow become more knowledgeable; and that state and federal policy makers would insist on a balanced curriculum.

We were wrong. We didn’t see how completely standards-based reform would turn into a basic-skills testing frenzy or the negative impact that it would have on educational quality.

STEMs Without Flowers

Recent days have brought yet another challenge to liberal learning in the schools: well-meaning business leaders and policy makers, rightly concerned about America’s (and their states’) competitiveness and the dearth of highly skilled workers able to sustain tomorrow’s technology-driven economy, are pushing so-called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) training.

STEM seeks to give students the skills needed to handle the technology-rich tools that undergird the modern economy. Understandably, leading proponents of STEM have included the Business Roundtable and the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), vividly aware of the difficulties that employers face in finding, hiring, and retaining such people. NAM reports, for example, that 90 percent of America’s manufacturers now face shortages of skilled production employees such as machinists, operators, craft workers, distributors, and technicians.

Such problems are real. Yet those who see K-12 education as the solution to them are pointing America toward yet another curricular tightening and another round of unintended consequences. In the long run, America's true competitive edge is not its technical prowess but its creativity, its imagination, its inventiveness, its people's capacity to devise new solutions, to innovate, to invest new organizational as well as technological forms, and to eke productivity gains out of what others see as static situations. STEM cannot claim to inculcate such attributes any more than the basic-skills folks can. Indeed, too much STEM may mean too few leaves and flowers. If children are deprived of the rich content of American history, as well as the history of other cultures, geography, the arts, languages, and literature, they will face unmanageable challenges on many fronts.

Fifty years ago, ours was a relatively stable society in which many people stuck with careers over their entire lifetimes, often working for the same employer, frequently in the same city or town. Today, mobility is the norm, and commitment to the corporation is a bygone nostalgia. People change jobs. They try various careers. They develop new interests. They start over again. They seize opportunities. They go back to school. They take up new hobbies. They live longer.

Neighborhoods are more fluid, too. People move in and out with greater regularity. And today's neighborhoods are more diverse in myriad ways.

To compete successfully in a world where one may well speak with his Hispanic neighbor before leaving for the office, bargain with a Nigerian taxicab driver, then negotiate a marketing deal via teleconference with counterparts in Tokyo, Sao Paolo, or Moscow, one needs to broaden his base of learning. It's doesn't suffice to know a lot about a narrow field. It's important to be well versed in a broad array of technologies, cultural histories, and languages.

Hirsch terms this intellectual scaffolding. The more varied and broader the information that you have at your disposal, the more likely you will be able to move seamlessly from one situation to another. Which we do more and more often.

Gone are the days when local clubs catered mostly to people who resembled one another in ethnicity and/or occupation. Today's bowling alley simultaneously hosts the union plumbers and the Asian-American meet-and-greet. Churches that are engaged in working with their local communities find increasingly that the world of ministry in their own backyard has the look of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Our children attend heterogeneous schools, and spend time and develop friendships with families for whom English is not a first language.

No preparation readies one for these realities better than the rich disciplines that are the province of liberal learning. For Aristotle and Franklin, it was enough that the well-heeled were well educated. Today, however, everyone needs such learning. In Robert Maynard Hutchins's words, "The best education for the best is the best education for all." More than ever, our world demands it.

The Chapters Ahead

This volume is organized into two sections. *Liberal Learning: Its Value and Future* includes three papers that make compelling arguments both for liberal learning and for a common curriculum.

Dana Gioia is chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts as well as a successful poet and literary critic. His essay focuses on the value of the liberal arts (especially the fine arts) for our students and our economy. When one looks to explain the success of America, he argues, the answer lies not in our mastery of technical information, but rather in our creativity, which is nurtured and flowers in liberal study.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr. is University Professor Emeritus of Education and Humanities at the University of Virginia, author of *Cultural Literacy*, *The Schools We Need & Why We Don't Have Them*, *The Knowledge Deficit*, and many other works, and founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation. He explains why additional time devoted to reading has not boosted reading results in the later grades, where comprehension matters. Such comprehension depends on possession of relevant prior knowledge, the teaching of which is being neglected in the self-defeating pursuit of reading comprehension "strategies."

David J. Ferrero is a senior program officer for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a former high-school teacher. He observes that, while mainstream school reform efforts devalue liberal education in favor of workforce preparation, rival models of liberal learning complicate efforts to promote any single curriculum. Ferrero goes on to argue that rival models of liberal learning have merit and that their partisans must work together to promote policies that nurture them all while honoring their distinctiveness.

Part II, *Restoring Liberal Arts to the K-12 Curriculum*, features 11 explorations of how to expand liberal learning by improving accountability systems, teacher training, and the education delivery system.

Martin West, assistant professor of education, political science, and public policy at Brown University, looks at how test-based accountability systems impact instructional time. He concludes that what gets tested indeed is more apt to get

taught and that increasing the number of subjects built into state and federal accountability systems may be an effective way to advance liberal education.

Matthew Gandal (executive vice president), **Michael Cohen** (president), and **John Kraman** (senior policy analyst) are with Achieve, Inc., a non-profit organization formed by governors and CEOs to help states raise their academic standards, improve assessments, and strengthen accountability to prepare all young people for postsecondary education, work, and citizenship. Their paper examines 13 states that have adopted high-school course requirements aligned with the American Diploma Project. While early returns show some progress (especially in Texas and Indiana), they conclude that it's too soon to be certain whether boosting high school course requirements will ensure that students receive a sound liberal education.

Kate Walsh, president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, tapped her organization's new database of collective bargaining agreements and school board personnel policies to examine the actual number of hours that students are in school in various U.S. cities. She finds that children in Chicago spend the equivalent of 8 fewer weeks in school per year than students in New York. While these data relate only to the hours that schools are open, not time that students spend on task, they plainly show that less school time leaves less room for liberal-arts teaching—and everything else.

Sandra Stotsky, an education consultant and member of the Massachusetts Board of Education, served as senior associate commissioner in the Bay State's Department of Education from 1999 to 2003. Her essay suggests ways by which the liberal education of current teachers might be extended through professional development requirements that could help to compensate for deficiencies in their undergraduate education and counter the effects of district policies that tend to deepen those deficiencies.

Joan Baratz-Snowden, president of the Education Study Center and former director of the Educational Issues department of the American Federation of Teachers, calls for the development and dissemination of multiple K-12 liberal arts curricula. She examines some of the constraints in doing so (e.g., the economics of the textbook and education materials industry) and urges more rigorous training of teachers, more involvement by them in curriculum development, and more federal and philanthropic funding to disseminate and prepare teachers to use extant curricula of high quality.

David Steiner, dean of Hunter College's school of education, discusses teacher preparation in and for the liberal arts. His concern is not only that future teachers receive a solid liberal education, but that they receive a liberal education

they can use—one that does not sacrifice the arc of history, or a broad understanding of literature, to the minutia that defines today’s college-level liberal arts courses. Moreover, these would-be teachers must be well-instructed in imparting that information to their own charges. It is not a question of which is more important, he argues, but rather striking the balance between a solid academic training and the practice of teaching those skills to youngsters.

John Holdren, Senior Vice President of Content and Curriculum at K12 Inc., and formerly Director of Research and Publications at the Core Knowledge Foundation, looks after the quality and scope of content and instructional approaches in K12’s curricular offerings. **Bror Saxberg**, Chief Learning Officer for K12, Inc., holds an M.D.-Ph.D. from Harvard Medical School and MIT’s Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, and focuses on applications of technology and cognitive science in K12’s offline and online materials to enhance student learning performance. Their article examines the current landscape of virtual education—what it is, what needs it fills, various forms it takes, opportunities for its application in different settings, and public policy considerations—with a focus on how online learning can promote and enhance instruction in the liberal arts.

Aaron Benavot, a senior policy analyst with UNESCO, compares instructional time in U.S. schools with other OECD nations. Though any such analysis is handicapped by the dearth of aggregate American data (Benavot looked at a handful of states that mandate instructional time), he finds that American students spend somewhat more time in school but relatively less of it in subjects other than reading and language arts.

The book’s last two essays feature successful leaders who ascribe much of their success to liberal learning. New York Prosecutor and Marine officer **Matthew Bogdanos** explains how *The Iliad* early on shaped his sense of duty, honor, and what it is to be a “fully sensate human being.” And venture capitalist **John Backus** describes how the characteristics of successful venture capitalists are formed by a solid liberal education.

Then we return with a few closing thoughts. And an appendix summarizes the authors’ recommendations.